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SUFISM - ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

Abstract: This paper presents the basic principles of the esoteric side of Islam, known as Sufism. It aims to get the general public better acquainted with Sufism and its fundamental doctrine; to highlight the esoteric and Islamic type of mysticism in an attempt to reduce misunderstanding about specific phenomena which, due to ignorance towards a particular culture or religious community, can quickly arise making the said group or an individual subject to hatred and intolerance.

Keywords: Etymology, Ego, Ascetic, Unconditional love, Tariqas, Balkan, Macedonia

The decision to choose this topic that deals with the esoteric side of Islam, the so-called Sufism or Tasawwuf, is the fact of the centuries-old presence of this Islamic phenomenon in Macedonia, expressed through its practical dimension, i.e., in the form of dervish orders or tariqas that deserve some scientific attention.

The esoteric side of Islam, or as some scholars call it, Islamic mysticism, is an extensive and complex topic. Aware of Sufism's breadth, seriousness, and complexity, we will not analyze it in detail here because, firstly, we would get lost in its esotericism. Secondly, we would need much more time and space to study and elaborate on it. Sometimes words are insufficient or too little to describe the essence of Sufism because this teaching extends beyond the capacity of our vocabulary. Some of the Sufis will say that only by living in the path of the Tariqa can only an individual understand Sufism. We will give a general picture of Sufism here, presenting only some of the essential questions on this topic with the sole purpose of introducing and bringing this teaching closer to the general public.

The esoteric side of Islam can not be considered in isolation, as a kind of spiritual activity, but must be taken in a complex whole with the question called Islam and its civilization (Filipović 2005: 19)

The Islamic world believes that with Muhammad (570-632), the Messenger of God, also known as the "perfect man" (Tur. İnsan-ı Kâmil), began the era of Islamic culture and faith. Islam starts from the view that God, during the month of Ramadan in 610 AD, through the mediation of the archangel Jibril, i.e., Gabriel, revealed this religion to Muhammad in the cave of Hira on the mountain Jabal al-Nur (mountain of light) near Mecca.

From the very beginning, since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, there has been a rapid development of individuals and small groups who have emphasized the ascetic life and mystical approach to the direct knowledge of God (Birge 1937: 13). This movement constitutes the esoteric practice in Islam called Sufism, widely accepted in many European languages. In the Islamic cultural tradition, it is found under the name *tasawwuf* (Arabic). Some scholars think that the first Sufis may be sought among the Companions, i.e., among the closest friends and confidants of the Prophet Muhammad, who were constantly near him and were best versed in Islamic doctrine.

The development of *tasawwuf* continued in the VIII century when the Sufis began to stand out from other Muslims in their clothing (simple white woolen clothing) and way of life, as indicated by the term “Sufi,” which appeared in the second half of the VIII century (Čehajić 1986: 9–10).

Before we continue with analysis and explanation of Sufism, first examine the etymology and historic semantic of the word Sufism.

There exist different theories about the origins of the word Sufism. Some researchers connect this word with purity (Arab. *Safa*), meaning spiritual purity because the first task of Sufis is to purify their souls from all immoral traits. (Џиљо 2010: 44)

Others bring the term Sufism in contact with the Arabic word “suf” (ṣūf), which means wool, which alludes to the clothes of ruff wool that the early Sufis wore, which in turn symbolizes the wish for ascetics or devotion to spiritual and humble life and segregation from the material world (Čehajić 1986: 7-8). In this context, it is often said that Sufis are *fakir* or *dervish*, one with an Arabic, the other with Persian origins, both meaning poor.

Others think that it originates from the word “*as-sufa*” (arab. as-suffa) (space before the entrance to a mosque) or the space where the first devotees of the *tesawwuf* sat (Abdul-Kadis Isa 1998:55). Those were “people of the bench,” meaning a particular group of friends of the Prophet Mohammad who lived a holy and ascetic life and avoided material pleasures.

Some theorists think that the word Sufi originates from the word *saf* (Arab. as-saff), which means “line” because Sufis, according to their understanding, are in the first line of proximity with God. In the tekkes, the most devout dervishes of a dervish order or Tariqa is a practice to be in the first line during a prayer. (Џиљо 2010: 44).

In the continuation of this paper, the constituent parts or components will be presented, i.e., the structure of Sufism will be presented. Thus, an attempt will be made to define the meaning of the doctrine itself.

The first task of the Sufis is to clean their hearts of all immoral traits. Taking into account the meaning of the heart and its role in man, the honest Prophet Mohammad a.s., said: “*In the human body exists one organ, if it is healthy, then the whole body is healthy, and if it is spoiled, then the whole body is spoiled. It is the heart*” (Selvi: 2016)!

Guided by this saying of the Prophet Mohammad, Sufis think that diseases of the hearth as aggressiveness, greed, anger, egoism, jealousy, hypocrisy, laziness, affection for cheating, hate, miserliness, stubbornness, adultery, and other immoral traits cause distancing from God. Therefore, to bring the believer closer to God, which is the primary goal of the Sufis, firstly has to heal these diseases of the hearth.

“I made one house from light, I gave it the name hearth. I left it a legacy in the chest of man, whether it be man or woman, to man. That house of light, when it is happy is higher than my heavens” said God. “Wider than the Earth, that house of light, when it is under stress, not even a hair can pass, that house of light, when it is happy and clean when it is clean and happy, it is my home. My home is not four walls but the pure heart of man. Furthermore, now, when that house is dirty, it is the home of the devil”. Now things are clear. evil People have dirty hearts, satanic. Here there is no God. Here is the fight. For a man; to clean his hearth...”¹

The biggest obstacle that rises on the road to God is the **ego**. Sufis understand the ego as a hernia, meaning, the bigger the ego, the bigger the pain. This Sufi principle of (non) existence of the ego can be seen from a fantastic short story obtained by one of my interlocutors, which presents an event closely related to the mirage (Arabic *wal-Mi'rāj*), Prophet Muhammad's journey to Paradise. This event is key to a lot of Sufis, because according to them, it is the seed of Sufism, and following that, thanks to this event, the Prophet Mohammad is thought to be the first Sufi, “*father of Sufism*” and is a template for any who wants to joint that road. “*Aa, thirty-nine godly saints, miracle workers they were. And Mohamed knocks on the door.*”

*Moreover, from inside, the rehber speaks: “Who is it?” “It is me,” he says: “-Mohammad” “-Furthermore, there are a lot of Mohammad's here. For you, we do not open the door. There are many names here with Mohammad”. He goes back. He does not enter, he cannot enter, he is not welcomed. From God there is another voice, again “-Mohammad come back! Enter, from that door inside, at the *krklar*, to be with them together.” He comes back and knocks three times. “-Who is it?” “-It is me, Peygamber.” “- There is a Peygamber here too. You are the last Peygamber; how many Peygamers there are before you. We do not accept you either; go back.” He comes back. The third time another voice is heard. *Jenab-Al-laah* says: “-When you knock, when they ask you, when they ask you, who you are? You will tell them, I am *fakir*, a poor one, whose mind is not, with a woman, nor with children, nor with property, nor with riches, with, or on money, nowhere. I am only meant for heaven... The third time, when he knocked, and they asked “-Who is it” *Ben bir fâkirim*² Men. And, if he says, *ben*, it means, *aa*, you rise, I am a director, but no, he is not *ben*, *men*... *Ee*, it means, we all use that word, *fakir*. It means not to say *!* That word if you use it, you rise, you rise high. Who am I? And there, forty, we are all one, one is forty... One whole... And they open the door. And the Peygamber enters into the *meydan*.”³*

From this story, besides the ego, we can see another integral part of Sufism, and it is **ascetics**. “*I am fakir, a poor one, whose mind is not, with a woman, nor with children,*

1 Personal field research, 2013, west part of Macedonia. Bektashi elder - baba age 75, Albanian

2 *Ben bir fâkirim*, translated: I am a poor man.

3 Personal field research, 2013, south part of Macedonia. Dervish in the bektashi tarikate age of 50, Turk.

nor with property, nor with riches, with, or on money, nowhere."⁴ To enter heaven, or to enter and follow the Sufi path, and in that way reach God and unite with Him, to refrain from many earthly pleasures is needed.

Hence one of the most prominent features of dervish piety, and that is the voluntary deprivation of all property or ownership. In other words, it means giving up the material world in order to get rich and progress in the spiritual world. The Sufis will say: the spiritual and the material are always in inverse proportion, and that means: the more one grows materially and becomes more affluent, the less one falls spiritually and becomes poorer (Karamustafa: 1994, 14)..

This attitude or attribute of the dervish - ascetic living in absolute poverty is the starting point for every believer who joins the tariqa or dervish ranks, but also a permanent principle to live by for the rest of his life.

The Persian Sufi Abu Yazid Al-Bistami, also known as Bayazid Bistami (died 874 according to the Christian calendar), in Sufi teachings brought the method of strong **ascetics** and **meditation** with the goal through **self-annihilation** to come to God's core. (Новаковић: 2014, <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0352-5732/2011/0352-57321137481N.pdf>.)

*"Until a man is reborn, he cannot contemplate holy heaven, for the holy soul, till he is reborn. Once you were born from a mother, and a second time with a soul, so his soul is glowing."*⁵

Rebirth, which cannot be imagined without the intermedium of the *murshid*, i.e., teacher, represents the victory achieved in the fight which the *Sufi* has to start against himself or against the bodily soul, who is the center or passion. This fight is known in Islam as *Jihad*.

*"Man needs to fight his fight against himself, so he can know the Truth for what it is, all of God's power."*⁶

When we talk about Sufism, we cannot overlook the name of the great Sufi Mansur Al-Hallaj, known far and wide for his statement: "I am the truth" (Arab. An'al-Haq), because of which he will later be executed. Al-Halaj thought that the purpose of a Sufi and all human beings is the **unification with God** which is fulfilled through the path of love.

Unification with God, by Halaj, makes a person perfect, holy, because of which God himself lives and talks in him (Џиљо 2010:14).

Unwavering and unconditional love towards God is another essential component that is an integral part of Sufism. This component of Sufism was created by Rabija al-Adevija, one of the first Sufi women who lived in the 8th century, who highlighted absolute and exclusive love towards God as the most remarkable instrument in her mystical experience and searched for the Truth. The unconditional love which Rabija al-Adevija propagates is contained in a beautiful song of hers which goes:

4 Personal field research, 2013, south part of Macedonia. Dervish in the bektashi tarikate age of 50, Turk.

5 Personal field research, 2013, west part of Macedonia. Bektashi elder - baba age 74, Albanian

6 Personal field research, 2013, west part of Macedonia. Bektashi elder - baba age 74, Albanian

O Lord,
 If tomorrow on Judgment Day
 You send me to Hell,
 I will tell such a secret
 That Hell will race from me
 Until it is a thousand years away.
 O Lord,
 Whatever share of this world
 You could give to me,
 Give it to Your enemies;
 Whatever share of the next world
 You want to give to me,
 Give it to Your friends.
 You are enough for me.
 O Lord,
 If I worship You
 From the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell.
 O Lord,
 If I worship You
 From hope of Paradise, bar me from its gates.
 But if I worship You for Yourself alone.
 Then grace me forever the splendor of Your Face (Sufi Poetry: 2016, <http://www.spiritualfoundation.net/poetry.htm#96914485>).

Love is an essential topic in Sufism, accepted by many dervish orders. That is the real reason for the existence of man. For this principle, Sufis rely on the Quran verse: "Say: If you love Allah, then follow me! Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving and Merciful (Quran 3:31)!"

Real love is the root of all virtues and the only way to reach God. The root of love is not to love yourself but to love the source of love, God. Love is existence. The actual death comes when love ceases to exist. True love does not know death.

The lover is that person who keeps the love for God in his heart and whose goal in life is complete union with God. (On Love: 2016, <http://bektashiorder.com/on-love>)

Amongst early Sufis, with his teachings, a prominent place is taken by Ibn Arabi. The root of the system of Arabi was the doctrine called "**Unity of Being**" (Arab. wahdat al-wujud). According to this doctrine, God is the root of every being, and nothing exists but Him. Therefore, all that exists can prosper only thanks to it owning an aspect of Divine Reality. Moreover, the ultimate and only goal is returning to the source and merging with it.

A dervish once approached his Master, Hoja Ahmed Yasawi, and asked him, "O Master! Tell me, what is the meaning of Oneness?" The saint did not answer but only told the dervish to bring a big cube of sugar. After he brought it, Hoja Ahmed Yasawi asked, "What is this?" It is sugar, my Master," said the dervish. Then the Hoja ordered him to break it into three pieces. The dervish did that, and Ahmed Yasawi asked, "What do the shapes of these pieces look like to you?" The dervish said, "Well, this one looks

like a camel, that one looks like a horse and the last one looks like a man.” The saint took the pieces and ground them into power. He then asked the dervish, “What is it now?” The dervish replied, “It is sugar, my master.” Hoja Ahmed Yasawi then explained, “This is Oneness. We are here today, and we will be here tomorrow, no matter how or shapes change” (From the Teachings of Haji Bektash Veli, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://bektashiorder.com/teachings-of-haji-bektash>).

The most inspiration and instructions Sufis received from the practices and life of the Prophet Mohammad, i.e., from the Sunnet, but even more from the Quran, considered as the main instrument for their connection with God.

For some Sufis, reciting the Quran, in the course of their life, is their primary way of concentration regarding God, who is the essence of every spiritual way. (Лингс 2012: 27) Besides that, they are aware that the Quran is the in and outflow- that it flows to them through God and that its sentences are wondrous signs (ajet) who will bring them back to God (Лингс 2012: 29).

Besides its theoretic side, the *tasawwuf* has a practical side, that is, the *Tariqa* (Arab. *Tariq*, pl. *Turuq*), which is defined as a path, method, of coming closer to God (Čehajić 1986: 18).

As early as the 10th century, Sufi institutions were established: *ribat* and *zaviye* in Arabic, or *hankah* in Persian. All of these terms denote a Sufi center lodge or *tekke*. From the twelfth century, Sufism in the confines of Islamic culture is institutionalized in dervish orders or *tariqas*. (Циљо 2010: 219).

These *tariqas* were connected to one teacher, founder (*pir*), whose name the order carried, accepting his training methods, using his mystical experience, and following the rules of Sufi life he held and accented. His teaching is carried on through a continuous chain (Arab. *Silsila*), and the sheikhs who are created inside a specific dervish order become spiritual inheritors of the order’s founder. (Čehajić 1986: 19).

Dervish orders or *tariqas*, which existed throughout history are: Bajrami (turk. Bayramiyye), Jesevi (turk. Yeseviyye), Kadiri (arap. Qadiriyya), Kubra (arap. Kubrawiyya), Mevlevi (turk. Mevleviyye), Melami, Naqshibandi (arab . Naqshibandī), Nimatulahi (pers. Nimatollahi), Rifai (arab. Rifa’iyya, turk. Rūfai), Sadie (turk. Sadiyye), Suhraverdi (arab. Suhrawardiyya), Halveti (arab. Khalwatiyya), Hamza, Shazili (arab. Shadhili), Bektashi (turk. Bektaşī) and others. Part of these *tariqas* with their *tekkes* were found on Macedonian soil. Some of them, such as Kadiri, Melami, Rifai, Sadi, Halveti, and Bektashi, are active in Macedonia.

In every dervish order or *Tariqa*, exist four gates through which the believer should pass to connect to Reality finally. These four gates are *Sharia* (law), *Tariqa* (path), *Marifet* (knowledge), and *Haqiqat* (Divine Reality).

For this spiritual path to be realized, it must begin somewhere and end somewhere. The beginning stage is *Sharia*, and he contains within himself godly and moral values, and the end goal is the *Haqiqat* (absolute Reality). That which is between them is the road, the path through which it goes, which represents a joint of these two ingredients of Sufi life (Циљо 2010: 71).

Metamorphically the Sufi path is often represented as a walnut, whose green shell represents the *Sharia*. The rugged bark is the *Tariqa*. The core found inside the bark is the *Marifet*, and the taste is invisible but still present – *Haqiqat*, i.e., Divine Reality. This

means, to get to Reality, the walnut must first be plucked, then stripped, broken, and in the end, eaten.

Every gate is made up of specific steps or phases, *makami* such as denial, poverty, abstinence, suffering, repenting, conversion, patience, which through spiritually educational activity should be passed and for certain philological states to be reached called *ahwal*, as are pleasure, security, closeness, love, knowledge. In that way, the curtain is removed, which hides the soul from the Truth, and the soul of the believer will finally reach God and unify with Him.

As a fruit of the experiences of a large number of Sufis, *tariqas* deal with this practical realization from different modalities of ritual and prayer, *zikr*, and the final goal is for the human spirit to free itself from slavery, lust, and flaws, and adorn itself with virtues. So, the order-*tariqa* is more of a “cultivation of religious experience” or “a path of purification” (Trimingham 1971: 2).

These dervish orders represent a system based on the teacher-disciple conveyed through the Arabic term *mushid* (teacher, leader) and *murid* (disciple, candidate). According to that, the order is a practical method of leading and training of the disciple by the *sheikh*, as a leader who traces the path, thoughts, feelings, and actions and leads him through stages (*makams*) in integral connection with the psychological experiences or states (*ahwal*) towards an intuitive knowledge of the Divine Reality. (Haqiqat) (Trimingham 1971: 3-4).

Tekkes were the places for implementing this training. Those are places where Islamic Sufi thought was performed, analyzed, and experienced, and later it was shown to the populace. They as institutions of the *tasawwuf* and integral part of Islamic culture in which live and stay followers of the *Tariqa* (*murid*, *muhib*), who under material and notional control of a *sheikh* try to beautify their moral and ethics based on the Islamic Sufi principles (Изети 2008: 87).

It is undeniable that the tekke thorough Islamic history influenced the revival of Islamic policies, but they simultaneously showed great success in spreading Islam. Thus, the Islamization of certain parts of the Balkans is done through the tekke and the honest *sheikhs* who worked in them (Изети 2008: 88-89).

If incorporated into a definition that would characterize this doctrine as a significant spiritual phenomenon, the facts presented earlier in this paper would read: Sufism is an inner, esoteric dimension of Islam. A way of life aimed at realizing the Truth of God, a fundamental upbringing to approach, unite, and Oneness with the Absolute (God), achieved through a spiritual path - *Tariqa*. For every aspect of Sufi thought, life and ideal can be found the basis in God's revelation - the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Under the guidance of a spiritual teacher, a *murshid*, the soul should be educated; the heart should be cleansed of all bad qualities; that is, the human spirit should be freed from lust and imperfections and adorned with virtues. All this is possible only through the path of love, i.e., through the unconditional and unconditional love of God.

Sufism in the Balkans and Macedonia

The first hints of the presence of specific dervish orders in the Balkans, and thus in Macedonia, according to certain assumptions (Birge: 51; Изети: 2008; Носа: 2016, 73–100), appeared with individual missionaries who came to the Balkans before the Ottoman conquests, thus creating favorable conditions for the acceptance of Islam by these educators.

When we talk about the presence of dervish missionaries in the Balkans before the Ottoman conquests, it is inevitable to mention the name of the missionary Sar' Saltuk, who, according to legend, played a significant role in the spread of Sufism in the Balkans (Конеска, 2009, 231)...

Sar' Saltuk is considered to be the patron saint of Muslims who introduced Islam to the Balkans (İnalçık, "2016, 13.). Therefore, most Balkan tariqas considered Sar' Saltuk as a member of their Tariqa. However, Sar' Saltuk gained more respect among the Bektashis and, in the Balkans, is better known as a member of the Bektashi tariqa (Изети: 2008, 102).

Some authors believe that the role of these missionaries was planned and accomplished in order to colonize Christian lands. However, according to other authors, these assumptions are without more historical severe evidence, are based mainly on legends and are a folk epic (Norris: 1993, 89; Иналџик: 2004; Паликрушева: 2001, 7–12).

On the other hand, what can be said with certainty, supported by historical evidence, is the presence of numerous dervish orders in the Balkans from the Ottoman era, which has been continuously held until today. Crossing the Balkan Peninsula, the Ottomans brought with them their religion, Sunni Islam, but also, in parallel with Sunni Islam, Sufism, contained in the teachings of various dervish orders, entered the Balkans (ред. Стојановски: 1998; Ćolić: 1995, 6; Nehri: 2015, 78; Clayer: 2011-05-11. <http://www.iegego.eu/clayern-2011-en>, 2).

It is known that the dervish orders from the very beginning of the Ottoman rule in our region (XIV century) took an active part in the process of forming settlements and spreading Islam and Islamic-Oriental culture (Ћehajić: 1986, 5).

When Sufi orders or tariqas are mentioned in the Balkans, one is mainly given the image of protectors, defenders, and propagandists of Islam. However, the contribution made by the Sufi sheikhs (both in the past and today) and their followers organized in Sufi Tariqa is enormous (Abiva, 2005, 194).

The founders of the tekke, the sheikhs, and their dervishes, because of their open and humane behavior, were very popular among the people. Among the many activities they performed, particular emphasis should be placed on moral education, free food distribution to the poor, care for the bereaved and people in need, and assistance to the weak. As a result, all people, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or religion, could easily find food and shelter in their homes (Ratkovčić, " 2014, 55).

Sufism, expressed through numerous dervish orders, often accepted the dominant features of the local environment, so it was not uncommon to create a sublimated, a symbiosis of Islamic (Tariqa) and local (Balkan) elements, which contributed

to bringing the dervish orders closer to the local population and easier acceptance of this part of Islam by the domicile population.

The influence of the dervish orders spread from the Sufi centers - tekke, which existed in many urban settlements and many villages in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Kosovo. In the mentioned areas, various dervish orders were spread, such as Mevlevi, Nakshibendi, Halveti, Kadiri, Rifai, Bektashi, Hamzevi, which gave a specific tone not only to the religious but also to the social and cultural atmosphere in the mentioned areas (Ćehajić, 1986, 5).

The power of influence and function in the Balkan societies is visible in the number and diversity of the tariqas that have acted (and still act) in this area for centuries. The most numerous and widespread tariqas were the halveti (khalwatiyyah) and bektashi (bektashiyyah) orders during Ottoman rule. These two tariqas dominated the Ottoman Balkans throughout the Ottoman era (Abiva: 2005, 194).

The orders of nakshibendi (naqshbandiyyah), qadiri (qadiriyyah), and Rifai (rifa'iyyah) followed them in importance in terms of the number of followers and territorial representation. Surprisingly, all the mentioned orders somehow managed to stay to this day and quite retain their popularity.

Several other tariqas, such as the Mevlevi, the Bayrami, the Melami, the Naqshbandi, the Sadiyya, the Jalwati, the Shazili, and the Bedivi, appeared at different times and with varying intensity during the Ottoman period, some of them disappearing to the point of extinction, and some of them have entirely disappeared (Abiva: 2005, 194-195).

The weakening of the Sufi orders in the Balkans and Macedonia was in line with the declining influence of the Ottoman government. Indeed, the Balkan Wars, the two world wars, and other historical and political events hurt the reduction of tariqas and tekkes in this area.

The tariqas in Macedonia were most exposed to the emigration of the Muslim population to Turkey. By the 1960s, many tekkes in central and eastern Macedonia, once inhabited by Turks, were devastated due to population displacement. Particular mention should be made of the "Free Emigration Agreement" concluded between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Turkey in the 1950s, also known as the "Gentlemen's Agreement," which envisages emigration of the Turkish population from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Republic of Turkey. This agreement was fateful for the tariqa life and tekkes in Macedonia.

Today, untouched sheikhs' turbes (mausoleum) can still be found in areas where Muslims do not constitute a demographic factor. However, the local Christian population in those places still pays particular respect and attention.

Despite such developments that have negatively affected the tariqa life in Macedonia and the entire Balkan Peninsula, still, specific dervish orders with their tekkes managed to overcome all the storms throughout history and to continue to practice the esoteric side of Islam actively, being witnesses to the centuries-old tariqa life in Macedonia and the Balkans.

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